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From containment to appeasement

By NORMAN PODHORETZ

McGEORGE Bundy is not the man he used to be. Neither is Arthur Schlesinger Jr. As highly placed members of the Kennedy administration, they both believed that the United States had an obligation to contain the spread of Soviet power and influence by any means up to and including the use of force. Today, back in the academic world from which Kennedy originally elevated them, it is that obligation, rather than Soviet imperialism, they seem most concerned to contain.

Only last week, for example, taking a little time out from the tireless campaign he has been waging against various aspects of American nuclear strategy, Bundy urged that Congress cut off all aid to the contras who — as arguments like his force one to keep wearily repeating — are fighting to reclaim the democratic revolution in Nicaragua that has been stolen and betrayed by the Communist Sandinistas with the aid and encouragement of the Soviet Union and Cuba.

Last week Schlesinger too was heard from on the subject of Latin America. In a two-part article describing Fidel Castro in the kind of glowing terms he usually reserves for members of the Kennedy family, Schlesinger called, among other things, for a halt to "the militarization of U.S. policy in Central America."

F. Scott Fitzgerald once said that unlike his great rival Ernest Hemingway, who spoke with "the authority of success," he, Fitzgerald, spoke with "the authority of failure." On these matters, Bundy and Schlesinger are in the line of Fitzgerald.

Thus Bundy bolsters his argument for abandoning the contras by bringing up his involvement as Kennedy's national security adviser with the species of covert action by the CIA that led to the Bay of Pigs disaster. He asserts

further that President Reagan "is just plain wrong" in suggesting that Kennedy's "opposition to Cuban adventurism, which was indeed strong, would translate today into support for covert operations."

In his articles on Castro, Schlesinger also alludes, in similarly Fitzgerald-like tones, to Kennedy and the Bay of Pigs. And while he does not say so explicitly, he undoubtedly agrees with Bundy that Reagan's policy is inconsistent with the allegedly wiser attitude Kennedy developed after the Bay of Pigs.

Yet in a book written when he himself was still a believer in containment, Schlesinger admirably summed up this attitude in a statement made by Kennedy about the Dominican Republic under the right-wing authoritarian rule of Trujillo: "There are three possibilities in descending order of preference: a decent democratic regime, a continuation of the Trujillo regime, or a Castro regime. We ought to aim at the first, but we really can't renounce the second until we are sure we can avoid the third."

It would be hard to improve on this as a description of the Reagan administration's policy in Central America.

In any case, it is Bundy who "is just plain wrong" in focusing the debate on covert action, which was not then and is not today the main issue. The main issue was and remains whether the United States can respond effectively to Soviet expansion by proxy.

Professing not to know if the Sandinistas "will inexorably persist in an increasingly Marxist-Leninist course, with increasing reliance on Soviet and Cuban aid and an increasing commitment to the export of violent revolution," Bundy is not so far gone as to deny that, if they do, the United States

will have to take "fully effective means . . . to defeat and reverse any such Nicaraguan choice." At this point, shifting from Fitzgerald's authority of failure to Hemingway's authority of success, Bundy invokes the Cuban missile crisis as a model for action against the Sandinistas.

Yet even if we accept the dubious claim that Kennedy's handling of the Cuban missile crisis was a great success, all he accomplished was the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba. This supposedly great victory neither nudged Castro toward pluralism, nor weakened his ties to the Soviet Union, nor lessened his commitment to the export of violent revolution. What Bundy is offering here is not a model for action against the Sandinistas; it is a formula for doing nothing.

Schlesinger, on the other hand, does want to do something: he wants to cease treating Castro as a "pariah." There is, he tells us, a "new Castro," more a pragmatist than a revolutionary, more a nationalist than a Communist. Does this mean that if we normalize relations with him, he will renounce "his Soviet connection and his commitment to revolutionary internationalism"? No, says Schlesinger, not at all. There is to be no quid for this quo.

In place of Bundy's formula for doing nothing, then, Schlesinger gives us a formula for positive appeasement.

Obviously, Bundy and Schlesinger, like that other chastened Kennedyite Robert McNamara, are trying to atone for the other disasters they participated in during their time in office. And it is indeed true that in the — yes — noble cause of resisting the spread of Soviet-backed Communist regimes, the Kennedy administration made unwise use of American power, first

covertly at the Bay of Pigs and then directly in Vietnam. But in urging us to go the other extreme, the survivors of that administration, far from making up penitentially for the damage they did then to American power, are instead working to prevent that damage from finally being repaired.

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